

OFFICIATING SYMPOSIUM
WELL WORTH THE WAIT

NEW BOOK CHRONICLES
WORST TO FIRST PHILOSOPHY

THE 10 COMMANDMENTS
OF GOOD SPORTSMANSHIP

2021
TECH
GUIDE

SEPTEMBER 2021 ■ \$3.95

USA Hockey

Hockey in America

8
DAYS
A WEEK

When It Comes To Playing Games,
How Much Is Too Much?





By Harry
Thompson

DAYS A WEEK

▶ *When It Comes To
Playing Games,
How Much Is Too Much?*



BEFORE COVID-19 shut down hockey in western New York, a Buffalo Jr. Sabres 12 & Under team played a full and competitive schedule. Starting around the end of August and going through the middle of March, the Jr. Sabres laced up their skates to the tune of 65 games that season.

Throw in weekly practices and the 11- and 12-year-old players were on the ice close to 150 times during the season.

Right next door to where the youth team plays, Buffalo's NHL club skates from mid-September until early April, hitting the ice for six preseason games and 82 regular season contests. That schedule could be extended once the Sabres manage to snap their current playoff drought.

The difference between these two groups of committed athletes? The NHL's Sabres are paid professionals. The Jr. Sabres are on the cusp of puberty.

The Jr. Sabres are by no means alone when it comes to playing an ambitious schedule. Their season is rivaled by teams of all ages around the country. Some programs play even more games, well into the 80- to 90-game range, and use it as a selling point to attract players from near and far. And oftentimes the next season picks right up with tryouts a day or two later, followed by spring and summer leagues as well as showcase tournaments.

More Of Everything

When it comes to youth hockey, and youth sports in general, there is a growing concern over the length of the season, the commitment in terms of both time and money a family must dedicate to compete at the upper levels of the game, and the toll it's taking on America's youth.

To be clear, hockey does not hold a monopoly over these issues. Sports from tennis to gymnastics to basketball are all asking more from their players and parents in what many perceive is the pursuit of excellence.

Adam Naylor is a mental performance and leadership consultant at Telos SPC, a company that conducts workshops for athletes, sports associations, coaches and parents on the mental, emotional, education and developmental needs of their athletes.

The issue of how much is too much is a central theme of many of the lectures he gives and papers he writes.

"It's something that goes across the board of all youth sports," said Naylor, who has worked with USA Hockey programs and teams. "There's no sport you can't play year-round."

But just because a child can play a sport year-round, the question remains, is it in their best interest? While the vast majority of those interviewed by *USA Hockey Magazine* are against it, they acknowledge that there may not be enough scientific data to support their convictions.

“Just because a child can play a sport, year-round, the question remains, is it in their best interest?”

According to USA Hockey's Ken Martel, playing games are less efficient for skill development when compared to a quality practice.

Difficult to Swallow

After hanging up his professional skates after a 13-year NHL career, Jim Johnson spent time coaching youth hockey in Phoenix before embarking on a long coaching career in the pro ranks. He doesn't need scientific data to back up his beliefs. He need only reflect on his own path to the pros.

"I remember growing up and playing football, baseball and soccer," recalled the New Hope, Minn., native. "You were able to play other sports because the hockey season started in November. Now hockey season is starting in August. In fact, a lot of kids are still playing right now in camps and prospect tournaments and global scouting. It's almost a non-stop preparation, which is difficult for me to swallow."

Johnson is not alone. Over the years, several surveys have found that the two most likely reasons given why players and parents drop out of hockey is cost and time commitment.

When many travel programs require a seven-day-a-week commitment and cost in the range of \$20,000 for a season of topnotch competition, numerous passionate hockey experts wonder if many hockey families are being priced out of the sport.



SIGNS OF ATHLETE BURNOUT

▶ The signs of athlete burnout are not always obvious, and they can overlap with other kinds of stress, such as overtraining or life and school pressures. Parents and coaches should look for these three major symptoms:

• **Emotional and physical exhaustion:** Chronic fatigue from constant physical and psychological demands connected to intense training and competition

• **Devaluation and detachment:** A negative or cynical attitude toward sports and disinterest in performance

• **Reduced sense of accomplishment:** Negative perspective on performances and accomplishments

Burnout can also negatively impact other areas of the athlete's life and it has been linked to lowered mental and physical health outside of sport.

"I call it an arms race in youth sports where everybody is trying to do more than the next guy to get the best opportunities and advantages, but eventually it's got to stop somewhere."



HOW TO DOUSE ATHLETE BURNOUT

▶ Like an actual fire, burnout is best handled through prevention instead of reaction.

According to Dr. Thomas Raedeke, an associate professor in the department of exercise and sports science at East Carolina University, “burnout is a relatively chronic state,” meaning there are no proven treatments for curing it. It can, however, be prevented by managing the following factors:

Balance training demands with recovery: When planning for the season, be sure to add ‘off-cycle’ weeks to your athlete’s training program to promote optimal adaptation to training demands.

Promote balance: Take steps to make sure that an athlete isn’t overinvolved in sport to the point where

they are missing out on other life opportunities. Create a space where athletes have unstructured free time and are allowed to participate in or explore other interests.

Have a positive support network: Foster a more positive environment for your athletes.

Even the feeling of having a positive support network from teammates can result in less burnout and more motivation.

Empower athletes: Structure sport in a way that allows athletes to have some input and collaborate on decisions related to participation.

In the end, preventing burnout comes down to keeping sports fun, decreasing stress and reducing the chance that an athlete will feel trapped by their sport.

—Reprinted from *TrueSport.org*



“The parents and players are telling us that cost issues and time commitment are two of the main reasons why they’re leaving the game,” said former USA Hockey national coach-in-chief Al Bloomer. “So obviously when asked how much is too much, the longer season certainly adds to the cost and takes up a lot more time.

“Maybe we should evaluate ways to reduce costs, establish or certainly recommend cost limits on various classifications. Maybe we should consider establishing age-appropriate season lengths to help with the time issue.”

Arms Race In Youth Sports

Like the weather, people throughout the game have long talked about this growing problem, but doing something about it is another matter entirely.

For one, there are forces within the game that are not only content with the way things are, but are always looking to push the envelope even further.

Rink managers and hockey directors are simply trying to create programs to keep kids on the ice, especially during the lull of the summer months.

Still, concerned parties ask how much is too much when it comes to the number of games that are crammed into a youth hockey schedule.

Larry Lauer is the director of coaching education and development for the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University. Its mission is the study of the benefits and detriments of youth and high school sports on its participants.

In addition to holding a PhD in exercise and sports science, specifically in sports psychology, Lauer is a former hockey director in North Carolina and works extensively with Michigan Amateur Hockey with its coaching education programs.

“I call it an arms race in youth sports where everybody is trying to do more than the next guy to get the best opportunities and advantages,” he said. “But eventually it’s got to stop somewhere.”

Do The Math

With teams playing so many games, something has to give and often it’s practices that fall by the wayside. USA Hockey established guidelines that recommend a 3-to-1 practice-to-game ratio. The National Team Development Program, which houses some of the top 16 and 17-year-old players in the country, maintains that training schedule, while most college programs practice four days a week and play two games a week, usually on weekends.

EIGHT DAYS A WEEK

“Just do the math,” Bloomer implored. “If you consider the season at [approximately] 250 days long, from September to April, and you play 80 games. There’s not a lot of room for the recommended 3-to-1 practice-to-game ratio for skill development.”

Too often coaches take the easy way out to satisfy the whims of their players and parents and load up the schedule with games.

“If I’m a kid and you tell me that I can play this number of games, I’m probably going to do it because I’d rather play a game than practice. And I’m sure that parents would rather watch a game than practice,” Naylor said.

And that can lead to a drop off in the basic skills that help players succeed at the highest levels of the sport.

USA Hockey has long advocated for that 3-to-1 practice to game ratios and now advocates for more quality practices that promote skill development.

“We’ve gotten away from the hard game limits over time. It’s more about the practices,” said Ken Martel, one of the architects of USA Hockey’s American Development Model. “If teams shoot for a 3-to-1 practice to game ratio that would be a great mark to hit for kids development.

“Games are not inherently bad, they are just less efficient for development when compared to a quality practice.”



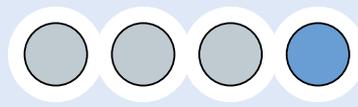
Rock And A Hard Place

So, what’s a parent to do? Who can they turn to for sage advice? Today’s players and parents are constantly bombarded with mixed messages from various factions from around the hockey world. More than one coach has threatened kids that if they didn’t play for a specific team during the spring and summer, or didn’t attend a certain camp, they would find themselves behind the proverbial eight ball when the fall hockey season rolled around.

“There’s a lot of pressure on a parent to feel like they’ve done everything possible for their kid. They think their kid will get behind if they don’t do X, Y and Z,” Naylor said.

“I always tell parents that if you hear a coach give a definitive statement, such as ‘if your kid does not do this camp or play on this team he will not get to where he wants to go,’ that should be a huge red flag because the one thing we do know is that there are a million different ways to achieve excellence.”

While most agree that there will come a time when an athlete may need to focus his or her energies on a single sport, sports psychologists like Naylor and Lauer tell parents not to rush it. Studies show that the sooner a child specializes in a sport, the sooner he or she reaches his or her potential.



3:1

▶ USA Hockey has long advocated that teams maintain a 3:1 practice-to-game ratio as a way of improving skill development at all ages of play. To learn more about age appropriate training guidelines go to ADMKids.com.

“Be careful what you wish for,” Naylor warned. “Do you want the best looking 10-year-old on the ice or do you want the best-looking 20-year-old on the ice?”

At What Cost?

When it comes to specialization and over-doing it, the costs go way beyond skill development. There are mental and emotional tolls on the young athlete.

“It is alarming for several reasons,” Lauer said. “One is the emotional psychological toll it takes to play that many games. You just can’t keep coming with that same emotion and intensity. It’s hard to keep bringing that intensity night after night. And if you factor in practices, if kids are burning out it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

In addition to the emotional ramifications of playing so many games, there is also a huge concern on the physical aspects of such a grueling schedule at such a young age.

“I played 13 years, and at the end of every NHL season I spent the first three to four weeks after the season rehabbing injuries—trying to build my body back up from the depletion of the grind,” Johnson recalled.

“My question is, how much wear and tear is there for a kid who’s playing that many games? I think they’re starting to see it in other sports of kids who don’t take time off and let the body recover.

“If it’s a grind at the NHL level, what’s it like for a 12-year-old?”





JOG
JOIN OUR GAME

ECO-SERIES
REPLAY

CUSTOM JERSEYS & APPAREL

JOGSPORTSWEAR.COM

#JoinOurGame



POLAR.COM/HOCKEY

POLAR

“If it’s a grind at the NHL level, what’s it like for a 12-year-old?”

Checks And Balances

Ultimately, there are no easy paths for a parent to map out what is best for their son or daughter. It’s a balancing act at best.

“When I talk to coaches and parents, I tell them that you’re still in control. You have a choice,” Lauer said. “If parents would say we’re not doing this tournament, then the coach is eventually going to have to listen.

“It’s tough because it goes back to the pressure that parents feel that they have to give their child every opportunity possible.

“More of a balance is needed. In the end, that’s what we’re talking about.” ☆

This is an edited version of a story that first appeared in the August 2007 issue of USA Hockey Magazine.